

No Use of Combat Air Power in 1962

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IN 1962 AS THE WAR CLOUDS GATHERED OVER the Himalayan mountains, Indian Army beefed up its defences. As a result IAF was asked to undertake tremendous surge in air maintenance – nearly thrice the normal amount. The air maintenance flying in Sep 1962 was 1179 hours. It increased to 3263 hours in Nov 1962. However, the inflow at the receiving end of air maintenance was not as spectacular. The dropping zones (DZ) were sub optimum; there was shortage of dropping equipment; there were too few porters to retrieve the dropped load and take it to Army posts; the identification between different items of dropped air load was ineffective or absent. All this resulted in around 80 percent of the drop being irretrievable.¹ This despite the valiant effort of IAF transport crew and helicopter crew which continued to provide much needed support. This has been well recorded and appreciated. They are the reasons of not using combat air – that are little known. This article is devoted to this second part.

During the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the political leadership did not use the combat air arm of the IAF. General Kaul the Army Commander responsible in NEFA, later confessed, “Lastly, we made a great mistake in not employing our Air Force in a close support role during these operations”.² This costly and catastrophic omission was a result of multiple factors which impinged on the decision-making process at the highest level. To begin with was the influence of Prof PMS Blackett on PM Nehru in defence matters soon after Indian independence. Blackett was a British advisor for defence. He had advocated only a tactical role for the IAF firmly advising against escalating any war that India may get involved in the future.³ The second major influence was the analysis of Director Intelligence Bureau BN Mullick, a close confidant of Nehru. Mullick concluded that Chinese bombers will bomb Indian cities in response to IAF’s combat use. Probably the horrors of the bombing of the cities during the Second World War were still vivid on Nehru’s mind. The next factor was a counsel on similar lines by the American Ambassador John K Galbraith half way through the war who over estimated the capability of the Chinese air force in

the absence of proper air defence infrastructure in India.⁴ Following was the strength of the two air forces on the eve of 1962 war:

The fourth factor could be the lack of joint planning between Indian Army and Air Force as opined by George Tanham, “The air force knew nothing about the army plans and was not consulted in any way about defence against a Chinese attack - not surprisingly as the army did not have any specific plan”.⁵ While this may be partly true at the strategic level, nevertheless, it is also well documented that Army-Air Force planners had explored use of air power and

Chinese Air Force		Indian Air Force	
Aircraft	Numbers	Aircraft	
* MiG-15 & MiG-17	1350	* Toofani (Ouragon)	57
* MiG-19	150	* Hunters	140
* IL-28 Bombers	500 – 600	* Mystere	105
* IL-14 Transports	300 – 400	* Gnats	33
		* Vampires	224
		Transport – Dakota, Packets, IL-14, AN-12, Otters	206

recommended the same to the Army Chief on more than one occasion. It is here that the plan came up against a dead end.⁶ When the chips were down even Kaul demanded combat air.⁷ Tanham goes on to state, “The Indian government, although in a desperate state and calling for massive American air support, did not investigate what its air power might do to redress the situation”.⁸ While the political-bureaucratic combine pleaded to US President John F Kennedy for 12 Squadrons of Star fighters (F-104) and four squadrons of B-47 Bombers as an immediate USAF help to stem the Chinese advance, they did not deem it fit even to consult the Indian Air Force Air Chief.⁹ The question that arises is as to what was the IAF’s professional opinion? It appears that the IAF leadership was quite confident about using combat air to own

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advantage and did advise the political leadership at every possible opportunity.¹⁰ It is a fact that Canberras flew 22 photographic reconnaissance missions between Oct 13 and Nov 11, 1962, during the conflict period, over Aksai Chin, Towang, Se la and Walong area. Some of the sorties were at 300 feet above Chinese concentrations. No damage to the Canberras from Chinese anti aircraft artillery was the proof showing the poor level of Chinese capabilities.¹¹ However, as Lieutenant General Kaul states in the "Untold Story", "Our intelligence set-up, of course, knew little on the subject and was only adept at presuming some facts and not realising the dispensation of exaggerated information about the enemy was as dangerous as understating vital facts".¹² Here General Kaul is referring to Mullick granting exaggerated capabilities to Chinese Air Force. Major General DK Palit put the quandary in the right perspective when he stated that the Intelligence agency (IB) which should have been supplying inputs to user agencies was not only collating information, but also interpreting the same and recommending policy action, mostly directly to the Prime Minister.

A case of cart before the horse. Air Marshal Raghvendra then a staff officer (Wing Commander) goes on to recount the exact professional advice given to PM and RM about marginal capability of the Chinese air force operating from Tibet and beyond. He underscores PM's apprehension about even a single bomb falling over Delhi and the war escalating out of control. Raghvendra minces no words when he states, "The debacle, partly due to the non use of air power but more so due to our foreign policy blindness as well as emasculation of the Army by playing 'favourites' by Krishna Menon, interfering with the promotion and posting of senior officers in the Army, ordering a totally unprepared army to 'throw out the Chinese' and above all insisting on giving the command of the operations to a totally unqualified and inexperienced 'favourite' General were all the work of the political leaders and the blame must be squarely laid there." General Kaul airs the same views when he states, "The professional judgement of the Air Force Commanders had been completely disregarded and their operational plans ignored to the extent that they called for greater infrastructural resources".¹³ Late JN Dixit, former Foreign Secretary (1992-94) and National Security Advisor (2004 - 05) writing on this stated, "I was the Under Secretary in the China Division dealing with external dimensions of the Sino-Indian crisis. So I claim some personal knowledge... suggestion put forward was that India should consider air strikes against the Chinese

forces in Tibet all along the front... Our information was that the Chinese logistical arrangements and supply lines were too stretched and that China did not have sufficient air power in Tibet at that point of time.... India's air strikes would stop the Chinese advance and neutralise the military successes which they had achieved. The suggestion was dismissed on the ground that the officers concerned were not military experts and their suggestion did not merit serious consideration... And by the time Nehru was coming round to the view of using air power the Chinese declared unilateral cease-fire... Later analyses and records of conversations between Chinese leaders, Henry Kissinger and Nixon clearly indicate that the Chinese considered the decision-making elite in the Indian establishment somewhat naïve and the Indian military planners inept in utilising the strengths which India had at that point of time, particularly in terms of airpower".¹⁴

Air Force could have been employed for interdiction, battlefield air interdiction, attack on areas captured by the Chinese, attack as a retribution on deeper targets. This definitely was possible. It could have been done from July 1962 onwards after Chinese had surrounded our forward post at Galwan in Ladakh. And definitely between Oct 24 and Nov 17 when Chinese were building up the road from Bumla to Tawang inside Indian territory and were restocking themselves. Indian Air force was ready. The ad hoc - so called "China-Council", to evaluate threat and formulate the strategy and even tactics to counter Chinese formed by the PM in Sep 1962 did not include the Chief of Air Staff.¹⁵ Lt Gen Kaul later stated that, "Unfortunately, it was the reluctance on the part of the IAF to be able to mount offensive sorties as a legitimate exercise of self-defence which added to the fears of Government in Delhi. If the Air Staff had undertaken to do this, the political appreciation might have been different (?)".¹⁶ This is sort of finding a scapegoat after the event. Unfortunately Air Chief was never consulted. Kaul was the same General who earlier as Chief of General Staff for Goa operations a year before had refused to include the IAF and the IN in the planning process, despite repeated advice of his DMO then Brigadier Palit. Since he wielded enormous clout with the PM and RM why didn't he suggest seeking IAF's appreciation of the matter? It is only when Kaul faced the music as Corps Commander in the field that he realised the importance of air support and asked for it. Mullick admits that around Sep 18, 1962 he was asked to present Chinese air force capability. Since IB did not have first hand knowledge they sought help from 'our good friends' (CIA). Following is a list of arguments put forward by Mullick and my analysis as to why all these were wrong.

Chinese Airfields. Chinese air force could operate from airfields in Tibet, Sinkiang and Yunan province, from all of which air attacks on India could be mounted.

Comment. The airfields of Zinning, Lanchous and Kunming (2080 m) were located too far away from the international border to have any bearing on the ground battle. Nachu, though closest to the battle zone, was situated at an altitude of 4500 m, hence, was unfit for fighter/bomber operations. Jye Kundo, elevation 3800 m, and Chamdo, elevation 3230 m, were fit for MiG-19 operations against NEFA area, though with payload reduced by as much as 2000 kg, a penalty for high elevation. Thus, these fighters could use only cannons. IL-28 bomber could have operated from these bases striking cities like Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Guwahati, Shillong and Kohima. But certainly not Madras (Chennai) as stated by Mullick or for that matter even Calcutta and Kanpur. The strikes would have been with reduced payload. The IL-28 flying a high-low-high profile to extend its range would have had a radius of action of only 700 km and not 2500 km as implicated by Mullick. Even over the ground battle area, MiG-19, only with cannons would not have made significant impact. Moreover due to very primitive infrastructure at Chinese air bases, none of these air bases could have housed more than few aircraft. That too in the open and themselves highly vulnerable to IAF attacks.

Night Interceptors. Mullick categorically states that India did not have any night interceptors. Therefore, Chinese bombers could have attacked at will without any opposition.

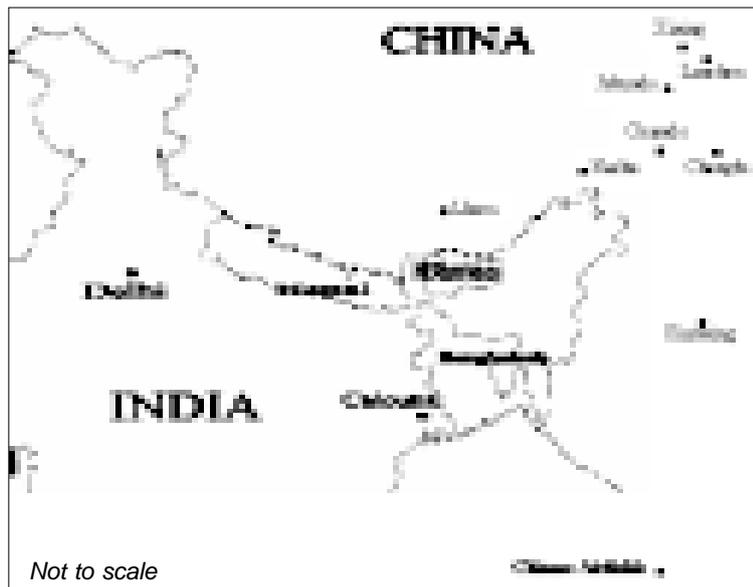
Comment. The IAF had night fighter squadrons of Vampires. No 10 Sqn had been dedicated for air defence of Delhi by night in 1954. And if the IL-28 had elected to come by day, they would have been intercepted and shot down by the Hunters and Gnats. No 10 Sqn which operated Vampires had airborne interception radar called A-10.

Quantum of Chinese Air Effort. Chinese air force was the third largest in the world. Despite spares shortages, against India it would have mounted large and significant air effort, insisted Mullick.

Comment. Chinese air force had only 150 MiG 19 and about 500 IL-28 bombers the contemporary aircraft. MiG - 15 & 17 were obsolete aircraft. It faced major threat across the Taiwan Strait and so could deploy only limited numbers in Tibet. These few would have had very serious limitations in performance operating from high altitude airfields.

Canberra Operations & MiG-19. Mullick states that MiG-19 being a night interceptor would have made it difficult for our Canberra to operate against Chinese targets.

Comment. The IL-28 was inferior to the Canberra. MiG-19 was inferior to Hunters and Gnats and was unfit for night interceptions. Yet while IL-28 was granted the capability to roam



freely all over India unmolested, our Canberras capability was prematurely written off.

Chinese Targets. Targets in China were beyond the reach of our bombers. So using Canberras would serve no purpose.

Comment. The Canberra's radius of action is 830 Km in High-Low-High Profile with 8000 pound bombs. This could be extended further using drop tanks or reducing the bomb load and operating from airfields at Chabua which could have attacked Chinese cities of Lhasa, Kunming and Chengdu.

Escalation of War. Using the IAF would have escalated the war which would have been an advantage to China.

Comment. Smart nations prosecute war to achieve set goals. They also prepare for the eventuality of escalation. From one extreme of "throw the Chinese out of Indian territory" announced in the Parliament as an order given to Indian Army, now the leadership and its advisors were afraid to use the air force even when its own army was disintegrating as never before in its entire history. Assam had been given up mentally and yet they called it 'limiting' the war. Whereas Lieutenant General Thorat only two years back had submitted a pragmatic plan in which purposeful escalation of the war was planned to trap the

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Chinese into our killing ground. This was a professional advice based on cold military logic. It was better than not yielding even 'an inch of territory', immaterial if that piece of land happened to be in desolate forlorn icy wastes of Himalayas. With the second phase of ground war starting on Nov 17, which saw another disintegration of the famous No 4 Division and headlong retreat into the plains, now Indian government was totally flustered. Rather than investigating with its own air force leaders it made a desperate plea to US President asking for 12 Squadrons of F-104s and four squadrons of B-47 bombers. But Indian Defence Secretary was not authorised to consult the Air Chief.¹⁷ If a professional appreciation had been given a chance the factual comparison would have revealed:

- IAF could carry far more bomb load than the Chinese air force over targets in battlefield.
- IAF could attack city of Lhasa, Kunming and Chengdu.
- IAF had more modern and capable aircraft compared to Chinese.
- IAF infrastructure, though not optimum, was far better than the Chinese air force.
- IAF could have attacked the Chinese airfields and rendered them totally unusable. Thus winning the command of air over contested area.¹⁸
- The Chinese air force was deployed in east China to counter major threat from Taiwan and USAF in Japan and Korea, Philippines etc.,
- IAF fighter aircraft were deployed both in North and East. Air support net had been established. HQ XV Corps asked for Close Air Support on Oct 31, 1962; HQ IV Corps asked for the same on Sep 7, 1962 and again on Oct 7, 1962. Because 7 Brigade deployed forward had no artillery support. These demands were vetoed by Army HQ, fearing Chinese air force interfering with IAF's transport supplies to the troops. IAF continued to maintain alert posture for the air support. Series of inexplicable decision continued to be taken. Tezpur runway was to be demolished on Nov 22.¹⁹ The Air Force was asked to fly its aircraft out from forward bases and destroy those that could not be flown out. Fortunately the Chinese announcement of unilateral cease-fire on Nov 21, on radio saved the aircraft and airfield at the last moment.²⁰

It appears that at different times, Air HQ expressed differing assessment of the Chinese air

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threat. While one section appreciated all the advantages for India in committing its air force into war, the other section was strayed by the reasoning of political leaders and senior leadership of the Indian Army. They argued that close air support against dispersed and dug in infantry in the jungles obtaining in lower Himalayas will not be effective. In fact close air support demands from the army units in the field were raised. But these were vetoed by Army Commands and the Army HQ even though air force pilots remained on cockpit alert for the

same. It was also reasoned that this action by IAF may invoke Chinese Air Force to interfere with our transport and helicopter operations which were the lifeline for forward deployed army troops. And of course in case of escalation Chinese Air Force could bomb Indian cities. No doubt the Director Operations, then Air Commodore HC Dewan advised against using combat air. But there were officers including the Air Chief who felt India would benefit by use of combat air force. Another such officer was then Air Vice Marshal Arjan Singh, then Air Officer Administration at Air HQ. Another was Wg Cdr Raghavendran, a staff officer in Operations Directorate, who later became an Air Marshal. Having stated so it must also be emphasised that from all accounts available, that after the start of the conflict it is quite clear that Air Chief including majority of air force officers advocated use of combat air, time and again but to no avail. Some sources do mention initial reluctance on part of the Air Chief but this is at best hearsay and not based on any evidence.²¹ Such contradiction in professional opinion on air power matters goes to highlight the accurate description of the complexity in air warfare by Winston S Churchill during World War II. That the air warfare is one of the most complicated affair and difficult to understand even by the professionals. Therefore the need to be thoroughly air minded.

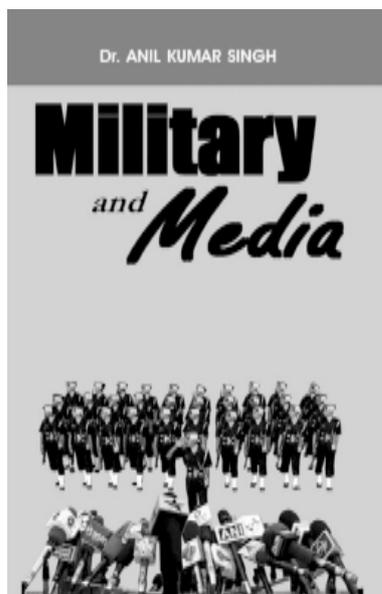
The first phase of ground fighting lasted from Oct 20-24, 1962. Thereafter, Chinese having established themselves within the Indian territory used the lull period upto Nov 17 to build up a road from Towang to Bumla and restock themselves. During this period they would have been highly vulnerable to IAF. Even during the second phase of the ground war, from Nov 13 to 19, the Chinese would have been highly vulnerable to air power. On Nov 20, when Assam had been mentally surrendered to the Chinese by the Indian

politicians, the Director Military Operations (Palit) in Army HQ was busy planning for further defence. Palit writes, "I again stressed the need for allowing the IAF to be committed to battle to provide air support for the ground forces but Sarin (Joint Secretary MoD) was still chary of committing the air arm to a ground support role before we had ensured air cover for north Indian cities. When I insisted he said that he would speak to Nehru once again on the subject".²²

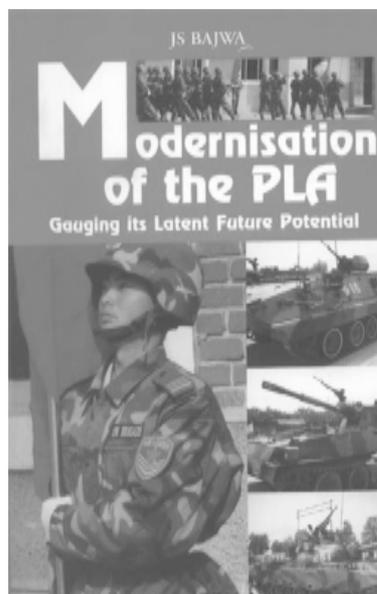
In final analysis the use of combat air power would have turned the tables on Chinese and the 1962 war could well have been a debacle for China.

NOTES

1. Niranjana Prasad, Major General, "The Fall of Towang – 1962 (Palit & Palit, 1/9 Shanti Niketan, New Delhi, 1981). p. 76. Also see, DK Palit, Major General, "War in High Himalaya" (Lancer International, New Delhi, 1991) p.224.
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3. Bharat Karnad, "Nuclear Weapons & Indian Security - The Realist foundations of Strategy" (Macmillan India Ltd, New Delhi, 2000), p. 172.
4. Jasjit Singh, Air Cmde, "Role of Air Power in India's Defence", a paper presented at conference on Air Power in India's Security, New Delhi, Oct 2000.
5. George K Tanham, "The Indian Air Force - Trends & Prospects (Vision Books, New Delhi, 1995), pp. 44-45.
6. DK Palit, Major General, "War in High Himalaya" (Lancer International, New Delhi, 1991). pp166-168 & p. 180.
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9. Palit, op. cit. p. 375. Also see RD Pradhan's, "Debacle to Revival" (Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1998), pp. 104-05.
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12. Kaul, op. cit. p. 441.
13. Ibid. p. 442.
14. J. N. Dixit, "Indian Foreign Service – History and Challenge", Konark Publishers, New Delhi, 2005. p. 99 and p.171.
15. Pushpinder Singh, "The Air War that Never Was" article in Vayu magazine VII/92.
16. Kaul, op. cit. p. 442.
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20. Pushpinder, op. cit. p. Vayu. p.33.
21. Palit, op. cit. p. 211.
22. Ibid. p. 341.



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